



Health-care solutions don't have to be expensive

By John J. Benoit

Several sweeping health-care reform measures have been proposed in recent weeks. Each of them would dramatically impact how Californians receive health care.

The process began with Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger's proposal. As a part of the Republican Caucus health care reform working group, I recently had the opportunity to spend some time with the governor discussing the details of his proposals. One thing is certain: He clearly believes something dramatic must be done.

But before we begin to consider hugely expensive, far-reaching government run proposals, I believe lawmakers should step back and more carefully diagnose the problems with health care in our state.

Today in California there are 4.8 million people who have not had health insurance at any point during the past year. Breaking this number down further, it includes approximately 2.1 million individuals who have annual family incomes of at least \$50,000, who could afford to purchase coverage but elect not to do so.

Also included are hundreds of thousands of adults and children who are eligible to enroll in existing state-backed health programs, like Healthy Families and Medi-Cal, but don't take the time to apply.

Instead of making health care delivery more efficient and effective, the measures currently under consideration will blow up the system - and leave taxpayers paying the bill. With California still facing projected annual budget shortfalls in the billions, and growing billions of bond indebtedness, how can we contemplate adding \$8 billion to \$10 billion in annual taxpayer funded health-care costs?

Worse still, several of the proposed fixes amount to a new jobs tax on small businesses. A proposal that threatened the jobs of 70,000 Californians was rejected by voters in 2004. The expansive measures on the table today will cause some California businesses to consider massive layoffs, dropping their own health plans - or force them to close their California facilities for good.

And these plans may also be tied up in the courts for years. A federal court

recently ruled a similar plan adopted in Maryland was unconstitutional.

The Assembly Republican working group on health care reform is focusing on solutions that could provide more health-care options for individuals and businesses. We'd like to make coverage more affordable - especially for the 1 million plus working poor and temporarily uninsured who are not eligible for existing programs.

I will be working closely with my colleagues to craft fiscally responsible solutions that ensure coverage is accessible, affordable and available for California families. We can make health care more affordable by reducing costly government mandates that have driven up costs.

Californians should have more choices and freedom, not government programs, when it comes to their health coverage. They should be able to shop around and purchase affordable coverage, like catastrophic care plans that provide coverage for serious health problems. This could be an economical way for the young and healthy to purchase insurance.

Another lower-cost option, health savings accounts, has made it possible for more businesses to cover their workers. Under these plans, contributions are made to tax-free accounts that are used by individuals to purchase competitive health services. California should conform state law to coincide with federal law, which already provides this option.

I am confident that we can meet the vast majority of health-care challenges faced by Californians while resisting the pressure to develop large, costly government programs.

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